CREATING AND REPLICATING HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A GUIDE FOR BUSINESSES AND SCHOOLS

Carl Vinson Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

1785

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building a sustainable and trained workforce is critical to the success of businesses and communities. School systems play a key role in shaping the future workforce to fulfill talent needs in their communities and regions. High school experiential learning programs are an effective way to build talent pathways in communities. Experiential learning helps prepare students for career success through hands-on experiences. This guide is designed to help business leaders and school leaders conceptualize, develop, and implement high-quality experiential learning experiences for high school students. High-quality experiential learning opportunities require deep partnerships between school systems and businesses.

The experiential learning guide draws from best practices and examples from across Georgia and the United States to inform investment decisions related to experiential learning programs. This guide and a related resources page feature:

- A summary of experiential learning outcomes

- An experiential learning continuum to help sort and differentiate between various forms of experiential learning

- Themes from the analysis of high-quality experiential learning programs

- Nearly 20 case studies of high-quality experiential learning programs from across Georgia and the United States

- A decision tree to help school systems and business leaders evaluate what types of experiential learning would best suit them

- Keys to replicating high-quality experiential learning programs

FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

This guide helps business leaders make decisions about how to build talent pipelines through experiential learning. It is critical to align your investments with your business's goals (e.g., talent development, technical training, outreach, community building). The case studies featured in the guide and on the experiential learning resource page show how various businesses across Georgia and the United States use experiential learning to support their goals.

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The guide helps superintendents; principals; career, technical, and agricultural education directors; and other school leaders understand how experiential learning programs can support student success and other school district goals (e.g., college and career preparation, employability skills).

BACKGROUND

Experiential learning, sometimes called work-based learning, comes in many forms: apprenticeships, business tours, simulators, job shadowing, and connecting learning across subjects in nontraditional ways, just to name a few. Employers in Georgia commonly report that finding and cultivating qualified workers is a concern. School systems in Georgia are seeking to help connect students to pathways for career success. Experiential learning can help develop qualified, knowledgeable, dedicated employees from the ground up by connecting students to work and showing them where their education can lead.
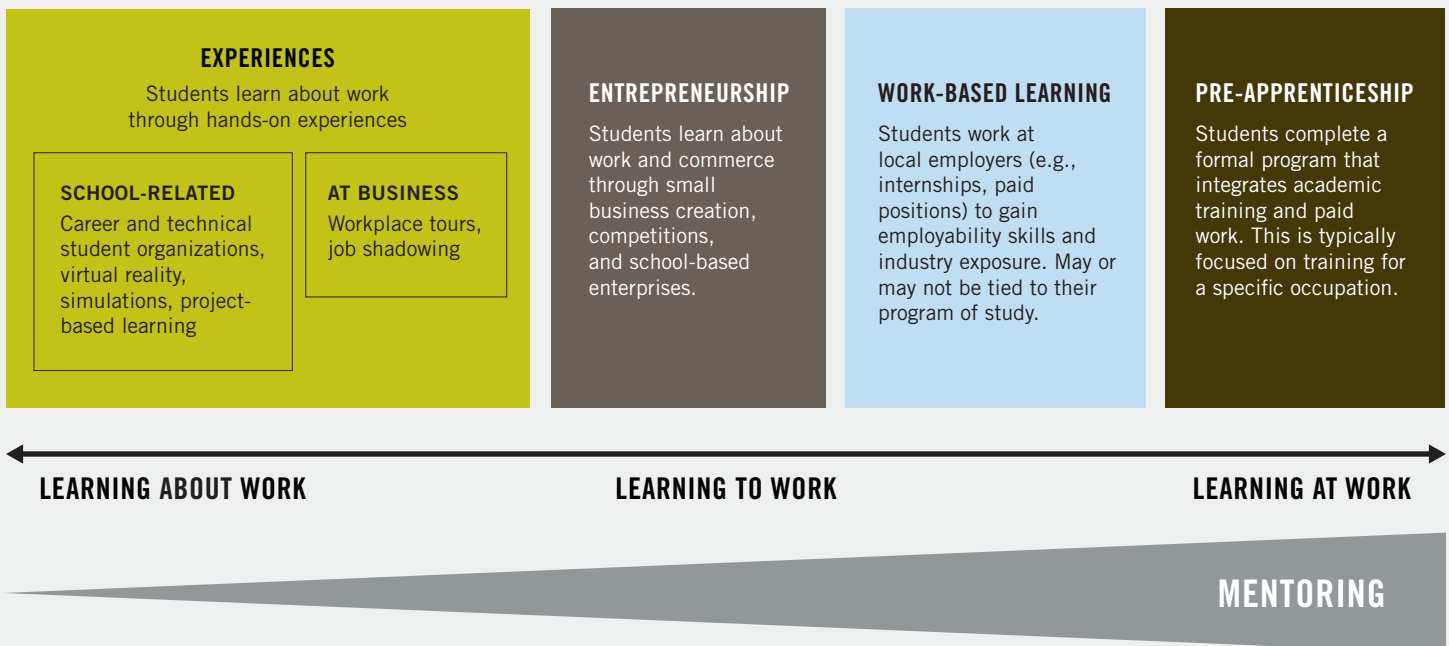
The Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia reviewed best practices in experiential learning throughout Georgia and across the nation to aid education and business leaders who want to replicate or expand high-quality programs in their region. The team at the Institute of Government interviewed a wide variety of those involved in experiential learning—in schools and school districts, departments of education, and businesses—and reviewed relevant literature to understand how program effectiveness is being measured and the outcomes of students involved in experiential learning. The continuum shown below, developed by the Institute of Government team, categorizes experiential learning opportunities so that education and business leaders have a starting point when discussing potential programs.

"Experiential learning" and **"work-based learning,"** which the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education defines as **"learning technical, academic, and employability skills by working in a real work environment,"**[1] are often used interchangeably. This report uses the term "experiential learning" throughout.

"There is a growing recognition that workplace experiences are essential to learning for all students. At its best, work-based learning in K-12 districts integrates academic learning with the workplace to provide paths to educational and career advancement for students."[2]
– Jobs for the Future

HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CONTINUUM

Preparing students for career success by learning through experience and relating it to classroom components.

EXPERIENCES
Students learn about work through hands-on experiences

SCHOOL-RELATED
Career and technical student organizations, virtual reality, simulations, project-based learning

AT BUSINESS
Workplace tours, job shadowing

ENTREPRENEURSHIP
Students learn about work and commerce through small business creation, competitions, and school-based enterprises.

WORK-BASED LEARNING
Students work at local employers (e.g., internships, paid positions) to gain employability skills and industry exposure. May or may not be tied to their program of study.

PRE-APPRENTICESHIP
Students complete a formal program that integrates academic training and paid work. This is typically focused on training for a specific occupation.

LEARNING ABOUT WORK   LEARNING TO WORK   LEARNING AT WORK

MENTORING

Adapted from: Building Partnerships to Overcome Barriers by the Minnesota Governor's Workforce Development Council and the Work-Based Learning System Development Guide by Jobs for the Future

WHY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

The current literature suggests that experiential learning has several positive effects on students.

• Participants are **less likely to drop out**[3] and more likely to graduate from high school. (In Georgia, the graduation rate for work-based learning students is 99.5%.[4])

• Students who take part in work-based learning **miss fewer days of school**.[5]

• They have **more confidence** in their ability to pursue higher education.[6]

• They have a **higher level of engagement** with potential career pathways.[7]

• They have a slightly **higher grade point average**.[8]

• At-risk students (e.g., excessive absences, disciplinary issues, probation) are more likely to establish **postsecondary education plans** if they are involved in experiential learning.[9]

KEY THEMES FOR HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Education, workforce development, business, and experiential learning stakeholders reported common themes across high-quality experiential learning programs.

An experiential learning program that works in an urban district may or may not work in a rural district, and vice versa. But elements from programs in each type of district can be used in the other.

The focus needs to be on what works for your community and meeting the needs of the students and local businesses. Partnerships with local businesses are critical.

Many successful programs take a broad view of what it means to be an employee and try to expose students to all the different skills and jobs necessary to make a business successful, from working on a manufacturing floor to graphic design to accounting to sales. This can be accomplished either at one employer or through a wide array of employers and work environments to meet the interests and skills of a diverse student population. See the Advanced Manufacturing and Business Academy case study on the experiential learning resource page to learn more about taking a broad approach to preparing students.

Transportation can be one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. This is particularly acute for low-income students and in areas without public transportation, which may not be limited to rural areas. See the Newton County Entrepreneurial Business Incubator case study on the experiential learning resource page to learn how one school created experiential learning opportunities in the classroom.

Many successful programs stack learning by building upon prior years' experiences—either all the way through high school or from junior to senior year—and incorporate current skills and learning. See the Academies of Nashville case study on the experiential learning resource page to learn how they stack experiential experiences.

Experiential learning programs are not always equally available to all students. Some stakeholders reported concerns about access and equity. For example, students may have to provide their own transportation or have an unblemished discipline record to participate in experiential learning programs. See the Great Promise Partnership case study on the experiential learning resource page to learn how Georgia school districts are providing high-quality opportunities to at-risk students.

Finding and retaining high-quality talent is critical for businesses. Many successful programs have developed high school students into full-time employees, resulting in the employer hiring them directly after graduation.

SEE THE CASE STUDIES AT
WWW.GAWORKFORCE.ORG/EXPLEARNING

GEORGIA FIRST ROBOTICS: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH CAREER AND TECHNICAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Georgia FIRST Robotics is an after-school, mentor-based, competitive science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) program that was recently added to Georgia's list of approved career and technical student organizations (CTSOs). CTSOs "provide motivation, leadership training, and career development opportunities for students and enhance their occupational, employability, and leadership skills through various activities such as conferences, award programs, service projects, and competitive events."[10] Georgia FIRST does this through teams that are run like small businesses. While each team includes necessary technical experts, such as engineers, programmers, and web designers, it also includes marketers, graphic designers, and financial managers, which opens the program up to students who may not be interested in the technical side of STEM. Each January, teams receive a kit of parts and guidelines for the year's competitions. They then have six weeks to build a competition-ready robot with the help of mentors and coaches. District competitions around the state begin in March and culminate with the state championships. The best teams then go on to the national competition in April where they battle it out with teams from across the country.

The Georgia FIRST competition parameters are just slightly too hard for high schoolers to accomplish on their own, which forces them to reach out to businesses, teachers, and community members for help. This is what Connie Haynes, director of Georgia FIRST, calls "mentor-based by design." This collaboration, in combination with real-world constraints like tight deadlines and limited resources, makes Georgia FIRST a great example of experiential learning that is preparing students for career success. A common barrier is funding, but Georgia FIRST is committed to not letting a team fail due to money issues by connecting teams with sponsors. Another common barrier is transportation. Because Georgia FIRST is now a recognized CTSO, school administrators can help with travel for competitions, but, as with many after-school activities, getting students home can be difficult. Some teams and districts have partnered with other student organizations with access to transportation, like Boys and Girls Clubs or Georgia 4-H.

Haynes said that what makes Georgia FIRST work for students is that "it is like club sports teams … it is an after-school, hands-on program with coaches and mentors and dedicated equipment provided where no grade is given." This allows students to build confidence and figure out if a STEM career is right for them. Georgia FIRST works for schools and team sponsors because of the low cost of entry, organizational support, and proven experiential learning model. Employers support Georgia FIRST because it gives them a sneak peek at the upcoming talent and allows them to mentor students. Additionally, Georgia FIRST mentoring can be used as an employee incentive and a way to give back to the community and younger generations.
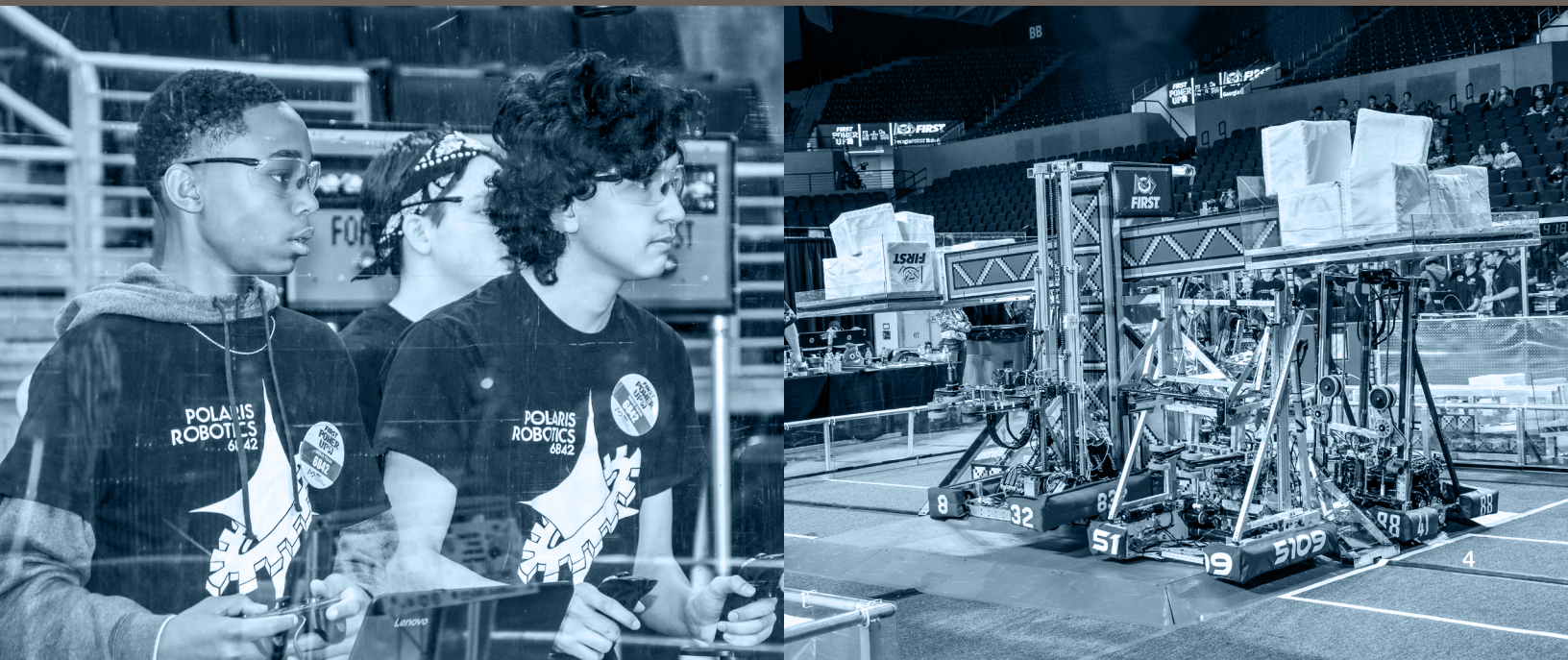
BUILDING A STEAM WORKFORCE IN RURAL GEORGIA: THE STEAM SUMMER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Community leaders in Coffee County, in rural South Georgia, were seeing local students graduate from high school, go to college, and move away for work even though there were many opportunities available locally. Business leaders wanted to connect students to local science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) career options by providing opportunities for experiential learning. The Coffee County School System launched a STEAM Summer Internship program in 2013 to help grow the community's workforce, expose students to local companies, and connect them with opportunities in Coffee County after college graduation. According to Christi Thomas, the STEAM program coordinator, the goal of the program is to "have the companies build a relationship with the students so they get excited to earn a STEAM degree and then come back to Coffee County."

Through the STEAM Summer Internship program, Coffee High School students ages 16 and older can apply for placements with local employers. The students must complete a rigorous screening and application process, participate in workshops on resume development and interviewing skills, and take part in mock interviews. The application process culminates in an interview and selection by the participating host companies. The program coordinator helps recruit employers to participate, handles the application process, and manages the program throughout the summer.

A variety of local manufacturing, health care, government, education, and other STEAM-related businesses serve as hosts, and students and employers are matched based on their interests. The paid internships last the entire month of June. Students work at the employer site four days a week and spend Fridays as a cohort in professional development seminars on employability skills and in seminars that expose them to employers in the community.

Students identify which potential placements align with their career goals, and the program coordinator attempts to match them based on interest. For example, PCC Airfoils, a local aerospace supplier, has hired summer interns interested in aviation and aerospace engineering. Students placed at Coffee Regional Medical Center have expressed an interest in a health care–related field, and several students have had the opportunity to shadow doctors and observe surgeries. Employers are asked to give students a real project to work on during their internship, which Thomas said helps to create a sense of belonging.

The program has already begun to pay dividends for the local community by bringing young talent back to area businesses. Many of the students have continued with their companies after the initial internship ended. Two students from the original cohort in 2013 have returned to full-time jobs in Coffee County with their STEAM summer employer. Thomas summed up the STEAM Summer Internship program as "a way for the school system to showcase what we're doing with our students and what our community's future workforce looks like. We need companies to help train the future workforce."

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DECISION TREE

The decision tree below is intended to aid business and school leaders as they consider creating experiential learning programs. The tool can help assess your readiness, understand how your goals may align to different types of opportunities, and determine what best suits your organization's capacity.

START HERE
WHO ARE YOU?

EDUCATION

BUSINESS

CONSIDER

Do you have existing business partners?
— No → Building relationships ← No — Do you have existing education partners?

Yes ↓

Are you willing and able to provide transportation? — No → Amount of resources available?
— Limited → School-related experiences
— Sufficient → Entrepreneurship

Yes ↓

Broader impact or deeper impact? — Broader → At-business experiences

Can you host students at your company location?
— No → School-related experiences
— Yes → At-business experiences
— Limited → Amount of resources available?

Yes (Do you have existing education partners?) ↓ Amount of resources available?

Deeper ↓

What are your desired skills for your students?
— Employability → Work-based learning
— Technical → Apprenticeship

Investment goals?
— Community → Work-based learning
— Workforce → Apprenticeship

Amount of resources available? — Sufficient → Investment goals?

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CASE STUDY MATRIX

Nineteen case studies from across Georgia and the United States demonstrate high-quality experiential learning opportunities for high school students. The matrix details the case studies, where they fall on the continuum, the secret to their success, and why the approach matters. See the continuum on page two for definitions of experiential learning categories.

CASE STUDY	School-Related Experience	At Business Experience	Entrepreneurship	Work-Based Learning	Pre-Apprenticeship	SECRET TO SUCCESS	WHY IT MATTERS
Academies of Nashville	✓					Experiences over multiple years to deepen learning	Provides access to experiential learning aligned to career pathways for all students
Advanced Manufacturing and Business Academy	✓	✓			✓	Programs aligned to the local workforce	Students exposed to the diversity of jobs available in manufacturing
Boston Private Industry Council School-to-Career Initiatives				✓		Dedicated infrastructure and support staff for long-term success	Provides valuable job-shadowing and work-based learning opportunities for all public schools in the district
Brookwood High School Integrated Entrepreneurship			✓			Integrating entrepreneurship across the curriculum	Students learn the value of entrepreneurship
Central Education Center Dental Assisting Clinical Experience	✓					Partner with a local organization to help operate the clinic	Provides students with real-world experiences while giving back to the community
Coffee County STEAM Internship				✓		School system coordinator to manage the process and build business relationships	Makes students aware of STEAM career opportunities in their rural community
Colorado Career Wise					✓	Building a program based on Switzerland's apprenticeship model	Gives companies, across many industries, an active role in developing their future workforce while giving students real work experience
Entrepreneurial Business Incubator			✓			Coordinator to mentor and support student business owners	Allows students to build and operate businesses within the school walls
Frito-Lay Maintenance Pre-Apprenticeship Program					✓	Using partnership to develop a new career pathway program to prepare students for local jobs	Allows manufacturers to grow their own talent through targeted training programs
Geo-Construction	✓		✓			Combines core classes like math with CTE classes through experiential learning	Students apply combined geometry and construction skills to build homes that give back to the community

CASE STUDY	School-Related Experience	At Business Experience	Entrepreneurship	Work-Based Learning	Pre-Apprenticeship	SECRET TO SUCCESS	WHY IT MATTERS
Georgia Consortium for Advanced Technical Training Apprenticeship					▨	Utilizing a German apprenticeship curriculum translated into English	Combines students' high school studies with an industrial maintenance apprenticeship program
Georgia FIRST Robotics	▨					National organization with state support that makes implementation easy and cost-effective	Develops interest in STEM fields while teaching employability skills through mentorship
Georgia United Credit Union at the Academy for Advanced Studies	▨	▨		▨		Credit union branch at the school creates real-world opportunities	Bringing the classwork to life through experiential learning
Great Promise Partnership				▨		Coordinators in each community working with students and building business relationships	Supports at-risk students by providing work-based learning opportunities and additional support
Maritime Logistics Education Taskforce				▨		Business leaders coming together to build their future workforce	Helps students see the many opportunities available in the logistics industry
Pickens County Job Shadow		▨				Partners from across the community in many industries hosting job-shadowing experiences	Easy to implement a job shadow day in communities across the state
Reaching Potential through Manufacturing	▨	▨		▨		Deep partnership between an employer and a school system to create a new approach to learning and development	Provides at-risk students the opportunity to earn money and learn real-world skills while staying on track to graduate
West Virginia Simulated Workplaces	▨	▨	▨			Transforming classrooms from traditional instruction to student-run simulated companies	Simulated workplaces are used to create new learning opportunities for all students especially in rural parts of the state
Wonderful Company		▨		▨		A deep partnership between schools and a local business	A seamless set of stacked experiential learning opportunities to help students learn work skills while exposing them to agriculture careers

Define the goals of your experiential learning program to determine what to invest in. Your organization's overall talent and outreach strategy will guide what programs and experiences you invest in.

Match your experiential learning opportunities with your organization's capacity. For example, you may want to start with short-term experiences (e.g., school-related experiences) for several years before starting to tackle something larger and more involved, like internships or apprenticeships.

The organizational structure is key to long-term success. Ensure that an organizational support structure is in place to help manage experiential learning opportunities at the school and at the business. This helps prevent duplication of effort (e.g., more than one school/teacher calling on one particular business/industry) and assists in other associated tasks, such as arranging transportation.

Business partners must be at the table. Businesses must see how their involvement fits with their talent development needs and community investment strategies. Business partners can also help to ensure longevity of programs by providing ongoing leadership and support.

ENDNOTES

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Use a proven experiential learning model.
Consider using a proven model or method to create opportunities for students, but modify it to fit the needs of your students and community. Your organization can learn from the best practices and experiences of exemplar programs in Georgia and across the United States.

Identify an experiential learning champion.
Have a champion who is passionate and committed to experiential learning. This could be one or more individuals (teachers, school board members, school district employees, etc.) or a business leader. The organization must provide adequate resources and support for long-term success.

Stack the learning experiences. Experiential learning opportunities should build upon more than one year, bringing together what students learned in prior years with current learning.

Create experiences, not just events.
Focus on creating experiences for students instead of events. Experiences have a much deeper impact on student learning and outcomes. Experiential learning should also incorporate a reflection or takeaway session to help stimulate deeper thinking and connect the experience to what is happening in the classroom.

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